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Empirically Supported Recommendations for High School Service Learning Programs

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Abstract

This paper includes information on empirically supported recommendations for implementing a school service learning program. It is a succinct information base for anyone wanting an overview and specific techniques for providing a service learning program for secondary education students.

Empirically Supported Recommendations for High School Service-Learning Programs

Research is still fairly scarce in relation to best practices for service-learning strategies (Marks & Jones, 2004). It certainly was a challenge to find any empirically supported information on this topic, but even more difficult to find information pertaining specifically to students in high school. Most of what is published focuses mainly on students in the community college or university level. It seems that the concept of utilizing service-learning in our high schools would be of great benefit. Intuition may even tell us it is definitely something that should be implemented in our school systems. It seems to make sense that students can learn so much from getting involved. If the programs are implemented, are they implemented with the idea of best practices? Research is available, but it is still limited. Service-learning is more than simply having students engage in community service activities. There is an explicit educational perspective that is equally as important as the volunteering activities (Billig). There are several components for educators to consider when examining best practices for implementing, evaluating, and/or improving a service-learning program within a school. The basic assumption for examining a service-learning program is the idea that the programs may contribute to youth developing productive citizenship skills. According to several authors, community service for youth is extremely important in maintaining a democratic system to perpetuate a civil society (Forte, 1997; Sherrod, 2005; Marks & Kuss, 2001; Marotta & Nashman, 1998). In other words, the educational system has provided and will continue to provide a transformational setting for young people to come to understand their connection to their communities, thereby, realizing that they can effect change within their communities by simply becoming involved (Forte, 1997;

Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002). Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss go so far as to write that citizenship education should be as high a priority in our high school educational systems as our basic academic core courses such as math and science. According to Billig (2000), “Only time will tell whether service-learning will be sustained and whether the ethic of service, combined with powerful learning strategies, will become institutionalized as an important philosophy, pedagogy, and value within our schools”(p. 663). However, there are still publications containing some empirically supported information concerning some best practices when implementing a service-learning component into the curriculum.

There are several considerations for best practices when working with youth in high schools. Students may volunteer for extrinsic or self-centered reasons and/or intrinsic or altruistic type reasons (Ferrari & Bristow, 2005; Marotta & Nashman, 1998). When students are able to make a transition from extrinsic reasons to intrinsic ones, the likelihood of continued participation beyond the high school years in community service increases (Marotta & Nashman). This could help support the notion of implementing a service-learning program. It helps contribute to a young person continuing those pursuits which in turn contributes to that person becoming a productive citizen. Service-learning should help students make the transition from extrinsic reasons to participate to intrinsic reasons.

There are several extrinsic variables that contribute to youth volunteering in a community service projects. There has been an increase in interest of youth participating in community service projects since the early 1990s, part of the reason being due to colleges and universities showing such an interest in youth who provide evidence of

participation in volunteering (Marks & Jones, 2004; Jones & Hill, 2003). This is certainly an extrinsic reason many youth participate in service-learning type activities. Students may participate to obtain career-related benefits (Billig, 2000). Youths may start volunteering for extrinsic reasons, but it is of the utmost importance that the reasons evolve into intrinsic motivations if students are to continue with volunteering activities into their adult lives.

Intrinsic variables need to be addressed by school systems exploring, researching, implementing, evaluating and/or improving service-learning programs on the high school level. There are several important components that need to be implemented in a service-learning process for youth. One important component for schools to stress is to help the students actually learn about their own community (Hellman, Hoppes & Ellison, 2006). Students should be provided opportunities for education concerning the community service activity opportunities in their area, learn about their own neighborhoods, and learn how to participate in those opportunities that can aid their neighborhoods. According to Strahan, Cope, Hundley and Faircloth “a key to achieving high expectations is creating a sense of community” (Strahan, Cope, Hundley & Faircloth, 2005, p. 27). Hellman, Hoppes and Ellison’s (2006) research provided empirical support that this component was the most significant variable that contributed to students continuing to participate in community service beyond high school and into college life. Students need to be made aware of the needs of their community. This helps them actually make overt connections about why they are providing community service in the first place. This process shows youth that community service is an avenue where they actually can effect

change in relation to their own potential community transformation, thereby, empowering them and including them in a powerful way (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002).

The objective for the students participating in service-learning should be very clear to the students (Billig, 2000). The activity should be a quality activity (Jones & Hill, 2003) and students should be permitted to participate in that activity in a voluntary capacity (Jones & Hill; Marks & Jones, 2004). These particular variables were actually ones that were found to be critical to continued involvement by youth. Youth made it clear that they did not want to continue to participate as young adults in community service activities when they had been forced, even if it was via requirements, to participate in service-learning activities when in high school. Students should be provided quality opportunities to volunteer and they should simply be encouraged to get involved instead of being forced or required to do so. They should be made aware of the specific objective of the reason for participation in a particular activity. The encouragement can come in the form of an explanation of how their involvement in that particular activity directly affects their own particular community. Community service should be a quality type project. It is imperative that the activity is not busy work.

Encouragement from family, friends, or church communities for youth to participate in community service was a major contributor to youth continuing to participate in community service into their adulthood (Jones & Hill, 2003; Marks & Jones, 2004; Tourney-Purta, 2002). Youth need to not only hear from others that what they are doing is good, they need to see those around them participating as well. Just being told they are doing a good job is not enough. They are more likely to stay involved in volunteering into adult life if they can see this being done all around them by any

family, friends, and people in neighborhood church communities. An institution should be collaborating with other groups in the community when possible. This provides other institutions for the students to potentially become involved with after their high school years.

Students should be provided opportunities to understand the importance and relevance of their involvement in community service activities. In situations where students were provided clear explanations of why they were participating in particular community service activities, those students were more likely to participate in community service activities beyond their high school years (Jones & Hill, 2003). When there are students who have received benefits from outside services, the school should try to provide a connection in relation to the students being able to give back to a system that has provided support for them in the past (Jones & Hill). For the service-learning to be a meaningful, intrinsic experience for youth, a real opportunity for personal growth has to be provided. It is up the adults who work with these students to help them make meaning and connections of the work they are doing.

Students also need to be provided an opportunity for reflection on the activities. This is a way to help them make those connections that are needed between what they are doing and the needs of their community. They should be allowed to write and/or talk about the experience and what those experiences mean to them. Students might be asked if they feel they live in an imperfect world. One might ask them who is responsible for the situation that caused the community to have that need in the first place. They may also be asked something about what specifically they feel they have learned from participating in the community activity (Strahan, Cope, Hundley, & Faircloth, 2005).

These students need to be provided a way to help them incorporate the experiences into a developmental growth experience. When students are able to make connections with their personal developmental growth in relation to their personal value system, they are more likely to continue community service activities after high school (Marotta & Nashman, 1998; Marks & Jones, 2004). Schools should make an effort to know the mores of the school community to better help students make connections between their belief system and the work they are conducting within their community.

According to an investigation by Marks and Jones (2004), college students who volunteered for the first time in their young lives noted that they were not involved in any service-learning in their high schools. They said they did not community service because there was no support system in their high schools for involvement in service-learning. It would appear that these particular young people were open to volunteering, but were not provided an environment in high school to do so. High schools should be providing some types of opportunities for students to participate in service-learning activities, if we are to accept the empirical support that is out there.

Another potential helpful component is helping students come to understand through their work within the community that there are other people who have problems as well (Marotta & Nashman, 1998). As youth develop it seems they would benefit from having an understanding of the world outside of themselves. It may be a surprise to them to learn that others struggle. It may surprise them that even though they struggle that this can be a relative position. They may find that other struggle much more than they themselves do. This can lead to a tolerance of people who need help. Tolerance is a component that should certainly be examined (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002). It

may help the students come to understand volunteerism in a much broader view even than the connection with needs and community. It may provide a better understanding of community need in a relative perspective.

Civic education and knowledge are important for students to have simply because they are considered to be the most important variables that contribute to voting in our society (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002; Tourney-Purta, 2002). Perhaps if students can understand how our democracy functions and take responsibility by becoming involved in community service projects, students can learn they are empowered to affect change for the better (Sherrod, 2005). Students need to understand the importance of community service. Service-learning programs have to have components of civic education and knowledge for there to be any real “learning” taking place from the volunteering of the students (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss).

“At a time when social needs appear to be increasing while government programs are more restrictive, service learning programs may be in the right place at the right time” (Marotta & Nashman, 1998, p. 29). This may have been written 10 years ago, but it still rings true today. Although there are recommendations for consideration for service-learning programs, it should be made clear that there is still a great need for additional empirical support for what exactly may be the best practices when working with youth. The research is extremely important in helping create programs that are hopefully helping our youth become involved for intrinsic reasons in community service projects to help them become productive citizens to help perpetuate a democratic system to sustain a civil society (Sherrod, 2005; Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002). Intuitively, most people like the idea of service-learning programs for our youth. The concept makes sense. The

research that is really only beginning to be conducted appears to be supporting these intuitive notions. These are just some of the findings from research conducted with both high school and college students, and they certainly provide support for what seems to be best practices within the high schools for service-learning programs not only to help students while still in high school but also to help them continue with community service activities beyond the high school years. It is theorized that it is extremely important for people to participate in a democratic system to perpetuate a civil society. It does make sense that our schools should examine and implement empirically supported best practices while working with students.

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